Research and Evaluation of Japanese Buddhist Objects in European Museum: Lessons of a Digitalization Project

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Research and Evaluation of Japanese Buddhist Objects in European Museums: Lessons of a Digitalization Project

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(Translated by Dylan LUERS TODA)

Introduction

The three-year project entitled "Research and Evaluation of Japanese Buddhist Objects in European Collections" was launched in September 2010. This project was an extension of Josef Kreiner's on-going study, in which he has been researching multiple Japanese collections held in various countries of the European Union. It aimed at an encyclopedic survey of Japanese Buddhist collections in Europe jointly conducted by the Hosei University Research Center for International Japanese Studies (hereinafter HIJAS) and the Department of Japanese Studies within the Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies (hereinafter AOI) at the University of Zurich, the latter serving as the project's overseas co-operating institution.

The project was an audacious endeavor to do away with most of the limiting criteria which have dictated surveys in the past (such as object size, quality, art historical value, etc.) and to record instead all Japanese Buddhism-related objects in European collections. The objects needed only to fit within one of the following categories: ① sculpture, ② painting, ③ calligraphy and manuscripts, ④ sutras, ⑤ ritual implements, ⑥ textiles, and ⑦ ofuda amulets.

This project aimed to give European researchers the opportunity to deal properly with many hitherto unknown materials for the first time, to provide Japanese researchers with access to a multitude of new materials, and determine the current state of Japanese Buddhist collections in Europe. Furthermore, it was also anticipated that possibilities would arise at both domestic and international academic conferences for formerly dispersed research to cohere, as well as neglected research fields to be invigorated.

Considering these merits as groundwork, we further intended to enable a multifaceted, relativized and deeper understanding of the nature of Japan by adopting an extraneous view, and thereby to actively pursue an applied form of International Japanese Studies. While the researchers who were part of the project explored multiple research topics, the project simultaneously aimed to gather data for future research.

We were given three tasks by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology: to create and publish an open-access database of our research results on the Internet, to promulgate our research through an international symposium, and publish the symposium's proceedings in English. This paper hopes to contribute to future surveys and research by critically reviewing the project's characteristics as described above and reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of its three-year implementation.

Theory: Proposal

This project was recognized as a "Japan Studies Based on International Collaboration Project"

and was based on international cooperation from its beginning. The initially proposed five-stage approach was as follows.

1. Data collection (1st year - 2nd year): Collecting of object data under the guidance of Hosei University by utilizing ENJAC (European Network of Japanese Art Collections). (Japanese and European researchers will carry out on-site research according to needs).
2. Organization (1st year - 2nd year): The gathering and arrangement of metadata at the University of Zurich by a full-time person-in-charge.
3. Digitalization: (1st year - 2nd year): Transfer of metadata to Hosei University, where they will be digitalized and internally released.
4. Analysis (2nd year - 3rd year): Analysis of metadata by the domestic-overseas joint research team of the HIJAS and the AOI.
5. Public Release (3rd year): Public release of research results (review symposium, English publication, and launch of the open-access database on the Internet).

The core team responsible for the bulk of work for this project consisted of members of the HIJAS and AOI, and was notable for its multidisciplinary nature: members covered not only art history and ethnology, but also philosophy, religious studies, and history. The composition of this team—which in addition had access to a host of specialists through the cooperation of leading museums and universities in Japan— obviously made a favorable impression on European institutions.

The project presented an attractive opportunity for European museums to engage in joint research largely owing to the cooperation of the Vice Director of the Tokyo National Museum, Shimatani Hiroyuki 島谷弘幸, Vice Director of the National Museum of Japanese History, Kurushima Hiroshi 久留島浩, Director of the Nara National Museum, Yuyama Ken'ichi 湯山賢一, the curators of these museums, as well as specialists from other institutions such as the Hirosaki University, Kanazawa Bunko, and so on.

We anticipated this double-structure of core team/extended team would enable the smooth transmission of cutting edge knowledge in art history, history, ethnology, philosophy, and religious studies to European museums. It was our hope to create a system that could provide appropriate advice tailored to the needs of each object, an individualized response for each museum, and answer the requests of individual curators. Apart from the specific scholastic endeavors already mentioned, there were also several other targets we had in mind:

- Promote the structuring of Japanese Studies in Europe.
- Build a structure for cooperation between universities and museums, and act as a platform for information exchange.
- Encourage the above developments by supporting re-structuring of various research organizations in Europe.
- Promote training for professionals in charge of Japanese collections by holding lectures on handling Japanese objects during frequent on-site research or through participation at various international symposiums.
- Support the researchers and curators who have an interest in the project and coordinate this external research, while simultaneously responding to requests pertaining to catalogue entries.

Development and Results

Ultimately, the project was able to accomplish its three assigned tasks by overcoming various

difficulties, and received the grade "A" at the final evaluation by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science in April 2013. Thus the project's success was officially recognized. Our survey covered the whole of Europe as well as Israel, a total of 28 countries with 79 museums. The Japanese Buddhist Art in European Collections (below, JBAE) database was released within the specified time frame in an organized form, and has fortunately been greeted with favorable response. It can be found under the following link: http://aterui.i.hosei.ac.jp:8080/index.html.

Our remaining tasks are as follows: to improve the interface, to continuously maintain and update the database, and to create a Japanese-language version (our final task).

In the course of our project, the AOI acted as guarantor (as a fellow European educational institution) for the European museums that own the collections. This measure was designed to address various 'seeds of concern,' beginning with the breach of copy rights and was, as far as I understand, a groundbreaking concept, even though it was fortunately rarely exerted. It goes without saying that the impressive domestic backing by the Japanese museums and universities strongly influenced decisions for the signing of the cooperation agreement. Additionally, the presence of a responsible party in Europe as well as the European language abilities and long experience of the project chiefs and executing members played a central role.

To what extent did we succeed in meeting our targets? In addition to providing for new evaluations and catalogue entries at almost all participating museums, our research also laid the ground for new projects and exhibition. One noteworthy example is the Musée d'ethnographie de Genève that was encouraged by the JBAE database to plan an exhibition entitled "Buddhist Japonism." The Musée d'ethnographie de Genève drew up the concept for this exhibition scheduled for autumn 2015, once it had convinced itself of the satisfactory content of the online database, which for the first time enabled liberal exhibition planning and loan requests within a realistic temporal and financial frame. In times of rising insurance and shipping costs for loans, the museum was able to avoid costly loan objects from Japan, and did not need to forego suitable exhibits; they were able to swiftly locate objects in European collections. The JBAE database will be central to the exhibition concept as well as design; the museum proposed that visitors will have access to the JBAE database within the exhibition space. The Musée d'ethnographie de Genève underwent major renovations and re-opened in October 2014. As part of this renovation, they have established permanent access passes for specialist databases including JBAE at small number of public computer terminals located in the museum's new library.

Another noteworthy example was the discovery of the Wilfried Spinner Collection at the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich (hereinafter VMZ), comprising of 80 paintings and amulets. After the museum accepted our project to work on its Japanese Buddhist collection, which led to the discovery of the said group of scrolls, the VMZ proposed to support an exhibition and contracted the writer to oversee the project as guest curator.

This exhibition entitled "Tokens of the Path" (German original title: WegZeichen) was prepared in a relatively short period of time and opened in November 2014, still in time to celebrate the commemorative year of 150 years of Swiss-Japanese diplomatic relations. Despite being a smaller collection, the Wilfried Spinner Collection revealed its impressive scope and relevance during research (Illustration 1). The collection covers a wide area of Japanese religiosity that can undoubtedly be described as encyclopedic, collected and studied by employing the explicit methodology of Religious Studies. The VMZ agreed to entirely shoulder exhibition costs as well as to publish a complete bilingual catalogue in German and English. The museum also considered applying for further funding in Switzerland to continue the research, thereby acknowledging the

Fig. 1 Ofuda *Asamadake*
Print on paper, hanging scroll
19th century (late Edo-early Meiji period), Japan
Object number 19399, Spinner Collection
Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich, Switzerland

Fig. 2 *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sutra*, Chapter 504
Ink on paper, Japan
Object number 0603, Bodmer Collection
Martin Bodmer Museum and Library, Geneva, Switzerland

significance of a still unknown Japanese collection. This might not have happened, were it not for the initial step taken by a project funded by Japan.

An example highlighting the merits of cooperation without immediate profit was the then unsurveyed Collection of Elizabeth Gordon in the National Library of Israel. By initially supporting the external research at the affiliated Hebrew University working with the National Library on this collection, the project later gained metadata, enabling further individual research.

Recently, our project team was able to look at one 504th chapter of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā* sutra held in the collection of the Bodmer Foundation in Geneva (Illustration 2) which was believed to date to the 9th century. Despite of displaying a red seal very similar to the famous Yakushi-ji seal that can be seen on all Gyoyō-kyō scrolls, it is highly likely that it is from the Kamakura period and thus not to belong to the important Gyoyō-kyō copied by Asano-no-Sakai 朝野魚養 in the 8th century.

A new discovery for the Japanese side surfaced in the form of ancient *gigaku* 伎楽 mask fragments in the collection of the Five Continents Museum (formerly known as the State Museum of Ethnology Munich). This discovery was extensively covered in the Japanese media. However, our team found older Japanese notes on these fragments in the storage left by other researchers in the past. They reveal that knowledge about these mask fragments was not so new to some Japanese scholars, let alone the Munich museum, which knew of their content and, consequently, about their ancient nature. This piece of information somehow got lost during communication between the project office and the press in Japan, resulting in an example of 'lost in transmission.'

Furthermore, an Ōbaku 黄檗 school-style *tathāgata* statue was discovered at the Latvian National Museum of Art in Riga. However, how it entered the collection remains unclear due to Latvia's troubled modern history. Similarly, the existence of an indigo sutra with gold script and fine illumination (likely to be part of the Jingō-ji-kyō 神護寺経) was discovered at the Swedish History

Museum, yet negotiations for on-site research are still on-going.

Facing Reality

While being very grateful for recognition of the project's accomplishments, I have to acknowledge the various hurdles that were not overcome. One look at the JBAE database reveals that many museum collections are missing. Unfortunately, this means that the encyclopedic survey is incomplete. How did this happen?

Needless to mention that in order to carry out the aforementioned third task, the project needed the human resources to deal with everything from intricate negotiations leading up to a cooperation contract (including the reproduction rights), stage to conducting on-site research. While the ENJAC network — mentioned as a possibility in the first of our planned five-stage approach — was established some years ago, it had not survived due to a lack of financial and human resources at the museum it was based at, as well as with the excessive responsibilities assigned to affiliated individual researchers in Europe. Currently its activities have ceased and it has no funding. Facing this reality, the proposed steps of conducting basic research to locate objects matching our criteria for inclusion, reaching an agreement on cooperation and copyright (to enable a freely accessible database), and the gathering of metadata became very difficult.

The first stumbling-block was the three-year timeframe of the project. It meant that encyclopedic surveys were impossible without considerable help from the European collections. The fact that a limited timeframe would pose difficulty for the encyclopedic survey was clear when we proposed the project, it was however assumed to be manageable simply by our additional efforts. But regardless of whatever effort one side puts in, schedules that ignore the circumstances of the other side (the European museums) are doomed to fail. Many museums prearrange their programs for the forthcoming three years and do not have the capacity to handle additional requests. Our only choice was to request the unreasonable, or wait to be integrated into a five- or seven-year schedule. It must be conceded that the timeframe was ignorant of the circumstances of our partner institutions in Europe right from the beginning. The timeframe for achieving our target was not in line with the situation on the ground, and the result was that we failed to achieve our goal.

The second issue is deeply related to the first: we presumed the existence of digital, or at least easily accessible, databases at partner institutions in Europe. This presumption lead to the misjudgment of the situation in the European museums, partly influenced by the more or less subconscious hope to reduce workload on the project's side, and resulted in failure. Even museums that run digital databases by no means have the complete set of data that we were looking for (i.e. detailed descriptions, measurements, dates, etc.). In reality, there are more museums without any databases.

The number of museums employing Japan specialists with good language skills is limited and currently on decline. In the light of this fact, it is a fundamental mistake to expect our European partner institutions to gather the data without a specialist on site. It is necessary that we ourselves devote greater effort and time to this inconspicuous and largely unglamorous work. To do so, we first must turn to fundamental on-site research without the promise of prestigious findings. It is no mistake to assume that museums have no accurate and up-to-date databases. This does not mean that European museums generally have no interest in Japanese objects; they simply lack the means to accurately research and evaluate them.

A few examples from our experience so far may be helpful to highlight the situation. The Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico Luigi Pigorini in Italy holds the Japanese collection of the

well-known artist Vincenzo Ragusa. It has been stored away for the past seven years and has not received any academic or commercial attention.

The curator who has been safeguarding the collection did so ardently, despite not being in charge of Japanese collections, and as a result has prevented the dissolving of the collection as well as its removal from the main museum complex, a logistical discussion well known in our field of work. That said, there are still no exhibition or research plans in sight. It is the hope for this colleague that substantial research on the Ragusa Collection should highlight its value for the understanding of Japanese culture as well as for the museum, especially for the museum management. In order to achieve this, serious interest from Japanese academia is desirable and necessary. We need to publish our research in English for a global audience and to thereby determine the value of the collection in general. For the museum in particular, we must enable its further utilization in exhibitions. After all, it is not a collection by an unknown collector.

It is a very significant step for Japanese projects to determine the historical and cultural values of Japanese overseas collections. This holds similar relevance for the Freiburg City Museum of Natural History and its Ethnological Collection (Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany), which was closed during our project. This museum holds a good portion of the collection of Ernst Grosse, an exceptional art historian and Japan aficionado (even more so than Otto Kümmel). Yet only the ethnology section remained closed; the other sections re-opened after renovations as a natural history museum. The Grosse Collection was pushed aside, but nevertheless remains in good storage owing to the care of the former director of the ethnological collection, who is also not a Japan Specialist.

Both of these examples share the following three aspects: (1) curators in charge who have no experience with Japanese object yet nevertheless enthusiastically safeguard Japanese collections, (2) despite being collections of known collectors, they have not been focus of academic interest in Japan, and (3) at present there are no exhibitions planned.

Projects such as ours with a Japanese backing have the responsibility to deal with such collections. They also have the ability to globally present research that contributes to an evaluation of the collection and to help museums, including the management, understand them correctly as well as to put them to use.

Currently, interest in Japan tends to focus on famous objects of recognized value that already have been published, while the majority of other objects in storage are left untouched. Even when the European museums in possession of such objects requests the research of Japanese specialists, their requests go mostly unanswered. These circumstances should compel project, such as ours to prioritize a much more comprehensive assistance. While the examples given above need to be taken quite seriously, and therefore certainly require Japan to cover research expenses, it must not be forgotten that this assistance actually represents not simply assistance for external institutes, but eventually for Japanese culture itself.

The third issue is reflected in the reaction we received from many European museums we approached: "Another digitalization project?" I perceived this reaction as a sign of too many digitalization projects knocking on the doors of European museums. Only few of these are productive in their eyes. Even if such projects start with the best of intentions, they do not guarantee that their results shall be made available to the other side, and do not seem to offer a convincing cost-benefit ratio.

One core problem is that the final results of such Japanese projects are not published in English. In principle, projects should be sending museums their research reports well before

the findings are published, in English or otherwise. Furthermore, in Eastern Europe, I have encountered museums that refused to show objects in storage to outside researchers without a binding copyright contract in place. Such reactions are rare, but they are rooted in bitter experience with Japanese researchers who act outside the international code of conduct.

While such a reaction appears draconian to those of us who are used to flexibility (including myself) they are correct in the legal sense, and reflect the current situation in which European museums and many Japan-based projects do not quite harmonize. However, these experiences gave us the opportunity to reconsider how to form a more positive and beneficial cooperative relationships.

Various losses occur when the requirements of the European museums, our partners, and the Japan-based projects do not meet. This can have adverse effects not only on intangible but fundamental elements of cooperation, such as causing loss of trust or reducing motivation. It can also tremendously afflict the "hardware," eg. by leading to the elimination of positions of Japan specialists. Focus in East Asian Art has shifted from the once leading economic power of Japan to China, which is now enjoying foremost international attention and builds on its new economic prowess to promote its culture. Japan can no longer rest on its laurels, as professorial posts and museum funding shift to Sinology and Chinese Art, and the general global focus gradually shifts away from East Asia. Furthermore, South Korea's determined national culture policy is beginning to show its effects, detracting even more attention from Japan. Another encounter during our project may highlight this: when surveying at one national museum in southern Europe, a colleague asked for advice on collecting Japanese objects. He explained that his institution has found it difficult to acquire new objects because they are lacking an expert in their team. Even when encountering objects at auctions that seem promising enough, they are not confident that such objects can be put to use. If they find themselves in a similar situation with Korean objects, he said that they would simply call the Korean Embassy, and their request would be forwarded to the Seoul National Museum, which in due course would get back to them with suitable advice. They cannot expect to receive such service from the Japanese Embassy, and are generally unable to find specialist advice to build up a substantial Japanese Department. That was bad news indeed.

Possibilities for Development

This project, which concluded in April 2013, has been remodeled into the JBAE Database Project to be run indefinitely by the Hosei University. I would like to conclude by contemplating on future prospects of similar projects by summarizing our experiences and the reflections above:

I still believe it is possible to overcome the stagnation of Japanese Collection in Europe by acknowledging the fact that most museums holding a Japanese collection do not have the capacity or freedom to employ specialists to keep them, and strategically design academic projects with domestic Japanese roots to cater to that situation. In this regard, it will be of utmost importance to support not only individual curators with advice tailored to their needs, but also entire museums and their managements with correct and substantial evaluations in historical, art historical, or ethnological terms.

We must recognize that in order to do this, there will be a greater need to engage in comprehensive surveys of collections. The current state of education in classical culture within Japan is grim. In Europe, there are not only few specialists of ancient and the medieval Japan, but the number of future specialists with interest in these periods is also low. This appears to be the result of a general shift towards economics and the social sciences at universities in the recent

decades. Second, even students in the humanities frequently (in my experience quite strongly) are led to research from the Edo period to the present. This is reason enough to invest in education of ancient and medieval culture both inside and outside of Japan, in order to build a more balanced body of Japan-related specialists.

A path of access to expert knowledge in Japan needs to be provided very urgently for institutions dealing with Japanese collections to improve the current situation of Japanese collections at overseas. This is important not only for museums researching their own Japan collection, but also for those intending to build a Japanese collection, but have no resource to hire specialists on a permanent basis. Currently, when confronted with such a situation, they cannot find anyone to consult. Where should the "emergency number" for Japanese culture be located? This system will not function by merely relying on the sympathy of already overworked Japanese researchers. There is a need for the Ministry of Education or the Agency for Cultural Affairs to establish and sustain an international strategy division.

In Japan, various projects researching overseas collections exist. These need to cooperate with each other, thereby allowing people to access data from completed surveys. While this must of course not harm the individual researcher's publication records and copyrights, but only making data accessible to all interested parties will prevent placing a double or triple burden on the European partner museums. In those cases where research data remains unpublished, inclusion in a coordinated database provides the next-best measure to prevent them from passing into oblivion. Japanese research projects need to actively learn from past mistakes, such as failing to report back to the European collection after return.

There is great merit in creating a structure of interdisciplinary research that would offer broader evaluations. Currently, many narrowly themed surveys are carried out focusing on specific topics such as *ukiyo-e* or Buddhist objects, are limited to the Edo period, and so on. I would like to establish endeavors that create structures that can individually deal with museum collections, and promptly offer appropriate expert knowledge tailored to the request. While its expression might be different, today the idea of "Japan" has deeply permeated the West (broadly speaking, Europe and the United States). In this context, the experts on site in the West — not those far away in Japan — are the people who can properly transmit Japanese culture and history to a wider audience. Supporting such experts on site who have been entrusted with this *Bildungsauftrag* (educational duty) is an important responsibility of Japanese research projects, and is also directly linked to the public duty established in the Japanese Museum Law of "the education of the people."

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